

A Corpse in the Well

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I knew clearly the dangers of village duty. It was a perpetual noose around the neck of a Mahar! My father was crushed flat by this duty. Here is the story of one of his experiences—a near fatal one. I still shiver at the thought of it.

It was our turn to do the customary duty at our village, Kamat. We had a house there. It was summer, so I was home on vacation.

A corpse was floating in an abandoned well near the village. It had bloated and risen to the surface. The Patil, the village chief, had already received the news in the evening. The Mahars and the Ramoshis too had got the news. Anna, my father, as the Mahar on village duty, and one of the Ramoshis, had both reported at the place where the corpse lay. Anna and the Ramoshi stayed up the whole night by the well, guarding the corpse.

Then it was the morning of the next day. The head constable and another constable were expected from the police post, to conduct an initial inquiry about the corpse. Till then, as per routine, the Mahar and the Ramoshi would have to guard it. My mother knew this was so. But now the night was over, the morning sun, too, had begun to descend and it was afternoon; yet father had not returned home. So my mother sent me to the well with *bhakri* wrapped in a cloth for Anna to eat. I hopped towards the well like a bounding deer. Seeing Anna sitting close by, I went to him and said, 'Anna! the night is over. The day's nearly gone. Mother is waiting for you! When are you coming home?'

He glanced at the well and replied, 'But the chief constable and the constable are yet to arrive! They will carry out the inquest; only then can the Mahar rest. So go and tell Mother that I'll be very late.'

He took out a pipe from his pocket and filled it with tobacco. He lit it with a flint and started smoking. I felt he was suppressing his hunger with it. I quickly said, 'Anna I have brought *bhakri* for you. Do eat it!'

'No, son, I'll only have time to eat my bread when everything is over with this corpse. Not before that!'

'But when will it all be over? And how long will you go without food?' To my questions, Anna replied, 'The village chief was here a little while ago. He told me that the head constable has arrived in the village. But he is dining. He'll come only when he has finished eating and drinking. When the corpse is fetched out of the well, the inquest will be held. Then we'll be free.'

Looking at the village chief who was sitting under the shadow of a distant tree, I said, 'Anna! The constable will come after his meal. The village chief has also filled his belly. Then why can't you too eat your bread? Why must you remain hungry?'

'Oh, they are officers! How can they work without food?'

'Then why should we work on an empty stomach? We're human beings, too.'

'That's what village duty is, my boy! Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies?'

Then I suggested a way out. 'Anna, you have your bread! I'll stand guard with the Ramoshi till then.'

At this Anna said rather vehemently, 'No! No village duty for you. It's bad enough that we have to endure it. Once you're saddled with the village duty, you'll be stuck with it for life! That's the tradition! That's our doom! You go home. I'll eat when it's time!'

While I was talking to Anna two constables in uniform marched up to us, their hob-nailed boots clattering on the ground. No sooner had they reached the well, than the head constable came pounding up on his horse. All the people around made way for him. The Ramoshi paid his respects from a distance. The village

chief stood up and saluted him. Anna bowed in a deep *johar*. The Ramoshi tied up the horse to a tamarind tree. Anna fetched water in a pitcher from another well, which was in a field by the stream. He poured it into the iron trough in front of the horse. Since they were expecting the head constable to come on a horse, the Mahar and the Ramoshi had made all arrangements for the horse's care. They put before the horse a sheaf of green maize shoots which they had brought from the field near the stream. The hungry horse greedily began to munch the fresh green grass.

The head constable, spinning his baton, took a stroll around the well. He peeped into the well, then looked around it and again into it. He walked towards the steps of the well. The upper steps were buried in the soil. Some lower steps had slipped into the water. Some steps were about to fall away from the level. It was an abandoned well; the structure was old. Inside the rim one could see overgrown, yard-long dried grass; shrubs had sprouted in the dilapidated portions. The upper part of the well had collapsed in ruins and its big long stones were scattered around. Green moss floated on the unused water of the well, and foliage from the trees near the edge had fallen into it and rotted. The well was quite deep. How to remove the corpse from such an awkward well? That was why the head constable looked like a man with a problem. The constable suddenly whispered something to the village chief. The head constable had a secretive discussion with the constable and the village chief about how to remove the corpse. Then coming forward, the constable yelled at Anna, 'What are you waiting for, Mahar? Jump in. How long must the officer stand here?'

Anna immediately replied, 'Constable, the Mahar's village duty is only to guard the corpse. How can we touch it? What would the heirs of this corpse have to say?'

Then the head constable said sharply to Anna, 'What would they say?'

Anna replied, 'The heirs will say, "Were we dead, that you touched our kinsman's corpse?" and they will have a grudge against us Mahars!'

'But I'm ordering you to! What are you afraid of?'

'Sarkar, you will go away from here. You will leave this poor Mahar to his fate! We want to go on living in this village!'

I was listening intently to this dialogue between Anna and the head constable. Suddenly, the head constable thundered, 'You lump of dirt! Are you going to jump, or do I have to whip you?'

At these words, Anna remained silent. Seeing that the head constable was enraged, he did not open his mouth. The constable and the village chief started bombarding Anna with threats and curses. They charged at him, overflowing with abuse, but Anna stood like a pillar. Perhaps Anna felt that if he said one word, if he said no, the constable wouldn't stop till he had drubbed him soundly. That must be why he kept quiet. In those days the oppressive power and prestige of the head constable were tremendous. Against this power, a Mahar was a mere wisp of straw.

Seeing and hearing all this was a shock to my young mind. I heard their curses, their threats, their shouting. I thought, whose dead body is this anyway? Whose well? Why should my father have to be cursed and threatened because of them? This was rank injustice to my father; I was old enough to understand that and also had some education to my credit. So I could see clearly the injustice being done to my father. He had not done anything wrong. His only crime was being the Mahar of the village. I was enraged at what was happening; my gorge rose with anger. In my rage I pushed into the argument. 'What reason have you got to abuse my father? The corpse's relations will come. They will remove the body. Otherwise, if the government feels like removing it, let them remove it themselves! Are you threatening my father just because he's the Mahar on village duty?' I let out this spate of words in one breath.

Suddenly, like a wildcat, the head constable spat threateningly at me, 'Who are you, you little worm?' And he said to the constable, 'Catch him! Give the bastard a good beating!'

At this signal the constable charged at me, raising his baton. I moved back a couple of steps, closer to my father. Anna clasped me to him. Then he too said in a raised voice, 'Shut up, son. You're not old enough to understand. Don't say a word. I'll have

to bear whatever happens.' From Anna's words, it was obvious that he had no alternatives left. Everyone was up against him, pushing him into a corner. He got up, removed his clothes, laid them to one side and put a stone on them. Then he went near the well, looked into it from the side which was still strong, and threw a rope down into it. Then he slid down the rope, about halfway down the well. I stood by the rim of the well looking down at Anna. My gaze wandered over the well. Suddenly, I saw a long, slender creature inside. I shouted, 'Anna, there's a snake below! A snake!' Hearing me, Anna stopped moving and hung dangling on the rope. He looked at the water below. Horrified, I shouted, 'Anna! The snake has moved towards the corpse! From under that stone! See there! See below! Come up. I'll go down.' Feeling the vibrations of my shouts, the snake retreated halfway from the water. He went back into the hole and lay peeping out. Anna was still dangling from the rope, looking at the snake. My shouts had drawn everyone's attention and they were craning into the well.

Looking at the snake, the village chief said loudly, 'O Rama! It's not a snake, it's a reptile! It won't bite!' I answered his words of wisdom with, 'Why don't you go down yourself? You'll soon find out what it is!'

'You talk too much,' the head constable said, glaring at me angrily. He issued a command. 'Mahar! Get down there! I am getting late!' My blood boiled; I swore at him silently, 'Curse this head constable! Was he born of a man or a beast? Whom did his mother lie under?' I could do nothing else to him. But I looked at Anna and shouted, 'Anna, don't go down. Come up. I'll be down there in a minute. Whatever happens let it happen to me. Our family will be helpless without you.'

Anna looked up at me, and said, in despairing anger: 'Son! If it is to happen let it happen to me! Let the village know that the village Mahar Rama died of snake bite. Died while removing a corpse from a ruined well, while he was supposed to be doing his village duty. Let the village know! Let the government know! Let the whole world know!' With these last words, and without further thought, he took his life in both hands, and climbing down the well, went to the other side. Then he tied the legs and neck

of the corpse with another rope which had been thrown down. Tied the knot hard, and shouted, 'Yes! Now pull!' The others on village duty pulled out the corpse, for three other Mahars had by now arrived at the site. Inside the well, Anna had been keeping an eye on the reptile, for fear that it would wrap itself round him and kill him. Now with the agility of a snake, he swiftly climbed the rope. The reptile moved from the hole and went slithering through the water, towards the stairs.

The threat to Anna's life had passed. My terror subsided. My eyes had filled with tears. Then Anna held me close to him. I wiped my eyes.

The dead body was bloated. It looked hideous and smelt foul. All had covered their noses. The preliminary inquiry was conducted on the spot. The Mahars shifted the corpse into the bullockcart brought from the farm, and scattered over it *neem* leaves that covered the body completely. Then they took it along a cart-track to a doctor about eight miles away for a postmortem. Anna as the village Mahar, another Mahar, two Ramoshis and a policeman went along with it. Anna wrapped in a fold of his dhoti the bread which I had brought for him, and said to me, 'Now for heaven's sake go home! Tell your mother that I am going to the dispensary along with the corpse.'

Anna set out. The cart disappeared along the road; then Anna disappeared too. Then I went home, numbed.

A storm of thoughts swept through my mind about the dangerous, deadly work involved in village duty. Why do Mahars do this kind of work? I asked myself. But the Mahars had moved the High Court fighting for the Mahar *vatan* share, a quarter of the share.

Only after I myself had become an advocate did I learn that for the sake of this hereditary right—this worthless right—the Mahars had played the game of litigation right up to the High Court.

Translated by Priya Adarkar
An extract from Taral-Antaral